

SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE



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Guests

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DEAN KATHARINE LUMMIS
DR. JOHN C. METCALF
MR. N. C. MANSON
MRS. N. C. MANSON



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For the past two years Sweet Briar College, in recognition of high academic standing, has given to the students who attain honors an honor dinner. At this dinner a speaker of distinction is invited to give an address on some academic subject. Last year Professor Katherine Jeanne Gallagher, of Goucher College, spoke on the "Torch Bearers"; this year, Dr. John Calvin Metcalf, of the University of Virginia, gave the address on "The Art of Making Acquirements." Dean Katharine Lunnmis, for the Faculty of Sweet Briar, spoke on "The Beauty of Vergil"; and Miss Jane Guignard, for the students, on "Gifts of Literature."

It is planned hereafter to print all the addresses, with the names of all the students and guests.

The Art of Making Acquirements

Not long ago in one of the New York papers there was an interesting account of an accomplished American woman. The writer thought she ought to have been included in a list of twelve living super-women. The newspaper correspondent thus summed up her accomplishments: "Scholar, writer, lecturer, mountain-climber, swimmer, oarswoman, horswoman, splendid conversationalist, well-trained listener, at home in the drawing-room, the ball-room, at the bridge-table, adaptable to a tent on an icefield or to a long journey on the back of a burro under the blistering sun." It is also stated that she began life as a teacher, and that she taught Greek, Latin, French, German, literature, history, elocution, and mathematics in various high schools and colleges. We are furthermore told that she was past forty when she climbed the Matterhorn for fun, and that since then she has scaled greater heights.

All this is very remarkable—and I should cheerfully vote for her, if I had a vote, as entitled to be called a super-woman. But what particularly interested me was this assertion about her education: "To that beautiful, soul-satisfying, now old-fashioned equipment called a classical education, with all its aesthetic branches, she was able to add a thoroughly modern, practical department of knowledge concerning business, politics, and current world and domestic events." Here is a super-woman, indeed! Only the versatility of Queen Elizabeth, according to her latest biography, is comparable to it. And good Queen Bess neither taught school nor climbed mountains, nor was she said to be a particularly good listener!

However true or false this may be, I have carried away one sentence from the account which I am going to take as a text for my little address tonight. It is this: "What Annie Peck really mastered at the University of Michigan, or somehow, was the art of making acquirements." Now the art of making acquirements, while hardly one of the fine arts, is fundamental in a liberal educational program. The ideal education is a com-

pound—I hesitate to use the word complex, for I am no psychoanalyst—the ideal education is a compound of knowledge that is useful and knowledge that is useless. I sometimes think that, after all, useless knowledge forms the most valuable part of our education. I mean, of course, the information we acquire which has no practical bearing, which has no definite utilitarian end in view. It is the education which enriches personality by enriching and refining our thought; ennobles our sentiment by saving us from mere sentimentality; and fosters a wholesome idealism that keeps us from lapsing permanently into the drab and dreary commonplace of Main Street.

Today we are apt to confuse the word “training” with the word “education.” The two are not strictly synonymous. Lord Dunsany, the Irish dramatist, makes this wise distinction between training and education. He was speaking of his own military training. “A trained man,” says Lord Dunsany, “can do one single thing with almost mechanical perfection; but an educated man can do almost anything that he is called upon to do. I was merely trained. It is better to be educated.”

Lord Dunsany is simply saying, in substance, that education has vastly greater potentialities than training. He himself illustrates the value of useless knowledge. He will not be remembered as a military man, but as a dramatist and poet who gave to airy nothings a local habitation and a name and to trifles light as air confirmations strong as proofs of holy writ. What mere training failed to do for him, an old-fashioned cultural education, plus genius, did.

I have used the word “old-fashioned.” May I remind you that newness does not necessarily mean trueness? In education, a liberal education, the value of a subject does not depend on whether it is old or new, but on whether it is true and whether it is humanly interesting. There are certain things in life, as in education, that are valuable because they are old and scarce—such as antique furniture, inherited laces, some family portraits, and certain old China. There are some things that are invaluable because they are intrinsically lovely, tried, and true—such as old poems, old songs, old faces, old proverbs, and some would add, old wine; but I am a law-abiding citizen and leave that out.

I am not a special pleader for the old education; I am no

lauder of a day that is dead, made roseate by the glamour of the past and the passion of memory. A sentimental preoccupation with the past is not a favorite indoor sport of mine, as it is with some of my fellow Virginians who are older than I. But in the confused and changing standards of the present, it is a good thing sometimes to steady ourselves by tempering our progressive impulses with the saving grace of a sane conservatism which springs from the memories of a great educational heritage.

In our eagerness to be efficient and modern we are apt to forget this. To my own mind the sin of extreme contemporaneity is just as unpardonable as the sin of ultra-conservatism. On the one hand, there is the person who seems to think that no literature worth while was written back of the year 1900, and who confines his reading to new books and current magazines; on the other hand, there is the complacent mid-Victorian who thinks that the art of fiction and poetry perished with George Eliot and Tennyson. Both are wrong, but in the long run there is more hope for the person with the Victorian background, despite the contemporary ill-repute of the Victorians.

Then there is your businesslike, up-to-date person with a faith in the mere mechanics of education, a faith which would be sublime if it had any real substructure. According to his theory education is a process through which aspiring and perspiring youth are put. Education is something that is done to you, a sublimated sort of surgery by which the cancer of ignorance is cut out and the gland of acquisition deftly inserted. But education or culture is not something that is done to you; it is something you do to yourself. It should result in a state of mind. We are all familiar with the remark that Boston is not a city but a state of mind. And presumably the maker of that bon mot meant to imply that to others than Bostonians it was a closed state of mind. I do not know about that, however, for there is evidence to the contrary, and Emerson, who was born a Bostonian, may be cited.

It is said that Emerson, when an old man, would accompany a young visitor to the door as he was leaving and, with fine graciousness, add this parting injunction: "Keep an open mind; read Plato." Whether we read Plato or not, you and I, young or old, should keep an open mind. The intellectual con-

flict of the ages has been between the closed mind and the open mind, between those whose chief concern has been to conserve intact the accumulated heritage of learning as a finished product, and those who, pushing back the curtain, have boldly fared forth into the unknown and so enlarged the boundaries of knowledge. Like true pioneers, these venturesome knights of the intellectual border have always longed to see "the something hid behind the ranges." Like Tennyson's Ulysses, they can not rest from travel, but their passion is "to follow knowledge like a sinking star beyond the utmost bound of human thought." That conflict between the closed and the open mind is on hot and furious today.

Our colleges and universities have changed since Matthew Arnold's famous and poetic indictment of Oxford as the home of lost causes. Not acquisition alone, but investigation as well, is their portion, so that the very freedom of thought which is their inalienable right has to be often defended or even pleaded for. It may be that some of them are too radical, and it is certain that some of them are too practical; but as long as colleges are truth-seeking centers, their serious sons and daughters deserve to be called the children of light. As long as they strive toward the liberation of the individual mind from prejudice, their existence is abundantly justified.

The mentally cultivated person, whether he be specialist or not, will seek to correlate his knowledge, will want to find out the relationships of things. Is not the chief discovery of modern science diversity in a larger unity, a universal relativity? Is not this idea at the bottom of the prevailing fashion for writing and reading outlines of science and outlines of history? Along with the current flair for satirical psycho-analysis, particularly in our novels, is there not a passion for an all-inclusive synthesis? And anyhow, what are a few thousand years between us and Tut-ankh-Amen?

The educated man or woman will not be contented with mere things, but only with the significances of things. I recall an illustration of this in one of the stories of Jack London. He is speaking of a native trapper in the frozen north, whose head was empty of thoughts, but who was keenly observant of things. "He was quick and observant in the things of life,"

says London, "but only the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such a fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able to live only within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe. Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bite of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear-flaps, warm moccasins, and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be any more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head."

I have often called Jack London an Elizabethan born out of time, for the Elizabethans with all their immense vitality and absorption in the present hour, had aspiring and inquiring minds above and about the mysterious facts of human life. And we, too, of this critical, satirical, Babbitty time, with all our vitality and absorption in the present, have all the curiosity of the Athenians and all the exploring eagerness of the Elizabethans.

One of the questions we like to put to ourselves just now is this: What handful of books would you take with you if you were suddenly banished to a desert island? It is rather futile, perhaps, as there are probably no desert islands left. It is almost as improbable of realization, if not of vizualization, as Boswell's question to Johnson: "What would you do, sir, if you were locked up in a tower with a baby?" But, still, we like to hear one name one's supposedly indispensable books. For my part, if I were limited to four, the first two would, of course, be the usual choice, the Bible and Shakespeare, and the next two would be Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and a Dictionary—but *not* Johnson's *Dictionary*. I am inclined to doubt, however, whether one would have much need of books in a desert island, or much time for books in a tower alone with a baby. In our hypothetical desert island, would we not become discoverers and inventors, and also recorders of our observations somewhat like Gilbert White in his "Natural History of Selborne" (though Selborne was not an island)? Would we not

cultivate the art of making acquirements? Would we not become creators instead of readers? And I imagine the science and the art of domestic economy would be a very vital consideration in this new Utopia, for alas! even educated man cannot do without cooks, and in that respect he seems more helpless than educated woman.

You recall that delightful play of Barrie, "The Admirable Crichton." In order to test his theory of equality between master and servants, Lord Loam takes his aristocratic family and his butler Crichton on a long cruise, after failing to prove his theory in his London establishment. The yacht is wrecked on a desert island. When it comes to grappling at first hand with the problems of primitive life in their new abode, London conventions and the traditional education of a gentleman are useless. Man's native ability, only man's resourcefulness and ingenuity, will serve in the emergency that arises from the clash of culture with nature. The butler alone rises to the occasion; he is the master and his lordship is the servant. So masterful, indeed, so admirable does his butlership become that his lordship's daughter, Lady Mary, engages herself to him, against his will of course, only to be saved from such a misalliance by the butler's all but superhuman tact. Back in London the stable equilibrium of inequality is restored. Life in a desert island—well, only Prospero can manage Caliban. I wonder if we had not rather stay at home and read our Bible and our Shakespeare, and "day by day in every way grow better and better."

Another and far more serious question which we college folk like to ask ourselves is this: What is an educated man or woman today? William James came to the conclusion that the real end of an education is to enable you to know a good man when you see him. But this is hardly satisfying as a definition. The truth is, it is about as hard to define education as it is to define poetry, and I have never seen a perfectly satisfactory definition of either. Education certainly involves the transformation and adaptability of the individual through acquisition and the application of it to human life. Most of us who think about such matters have entertained ourselves by specifying certain fields of knowledge with which an educated man or woman should have some acquaintance. We have tried to in-

dicating a sort of irreducible minimum of culture. My figure is a hexagon, a six-sided respectable modicum of basal acquirements. There are, of course, many others eminently desirable.

First, the ability to speak and write the English language correctly and effectively. It is a marvelous instrument, this composite language of ours, this harp of a thousand strings, on which the masters of verse and prose have played from the days of the gleeman. To speak and write it intelligently is the first commandment with promise; and the next is to pronounce it properly. Is there anything which reveals good educational breeding more fully than proper pronunciation, enunciation, and intonation?

Second, a good reading knowledge of some other language besides one's own. A philosopher once remarked that every time you acquire another language, you get a new soul. I don't know what foreign tongue is the most soulful; but I do know that the real acquisition of any one of them involves a prolonged spiritual contest with the world, the flesh, and the devil, a trinity specially troublesome to scholars before and since Luther threw his ink-bottle at his satanic majesty.

Third, an acquaintance with some of the masterpieces of great literature, including the Bible and Biography. Certain world classics—not necessarily the Harvard Classics, or any other five-foot shelf of books—certain world classics are guideposts of the human spirit, to which we may now and again hark back along the toilsome journey of the years for strength and inspiration; and no man or woman can be called liberally educated who has not touched them at least. Especially ought one to choose a few companionable books, as one chooses one's intimate friends, and make associates of them. Biography, which is history personalized, is a rich field in English literature. Great biography humanizes the art of life and gives us courage to play the game of life worthily. It also, like great poetry and fiction, peoples the imagination with men and women who have made the human lot more beautiful and more fruitful of good. It furnishes a finer standard of values by which to distinguish what is solid and abiding in character from what is superficial and transient.

Fourth, some knowledge of general history—of the steps in

that long, long process by which the past has become the present. No one can justly be called educated who has not some sense of perspective whereby he may perceive events and tendencies, not as isolated or sporadic happening, but as related in a larger scheme of things. How much confusion and even suffering have well meaning but ignorant men brought upon the world! How much unwisdom often animates the legislative or the oratorical mind, for instance, either because it has not learned or because it wilfully ignores the lessons of history.

Fifth, something of the principles and practice of one's own system of government. And the time has already come, or soon will come, when the intelligent person must acquire not only the national mind but the international mind as well; when he or she may not be simply an observer, an innocent bystander, but an active participant in world thought and policies.

And, sixth, the educated man or woman should have some acquaintance with the achievements of science. This is the modern field of wonder, the new renaissance, the land of romantic adventure. It is a noteworthy fact that the most widely read non-fictional book of the past few years was written by a man who began life as a scientist—H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*. I am not sure that it should be classed as strictly non-fictional. Let us call it, at any rate, the interpretation of history by the scientific imagination, the universe or bits of it as seen through a romantic temperament. But more significant still is the present popularity of that fascinating four-volume work, Thompson's *Outline of Science*, which is the universe seen through a scientific mind.

It is also a noteworthy fact that of the thousand or more words added to the English vocabulary within the last decade, the large majority are scientific terms. Hardly less significant than the new vocabulary of the physical sciences is that of the social sciences. The educated man or woman must know something of this vast and vital realm of human thought and endeavor.

What, then, does it all come to at last, when we try to formulate in a few words a working program for the educated man or woman? It about comes to this: Let him think straight, live right, and generously serve. We must conserve the best

of the old while we are experimenting with various panaceas whose exploiters claim for them virtues that will cure our ancient human ills. We must set greater store by the enrichment of personality and the training of character. A wise Frenchman once remarked: "It was always through enfeeblement of character and not through enfeeblement of intelligence that the great peoples disappeared from history." Let us not forget that in our quest for knowledge.

Finally, let us suppose that a college man or woman has succeeded in mastering the art of making acquirements, the phrase with which I began my little academic homily. What then? Is that the end? Nay, verily; it is but the beginning. "To be overwise is to ossify," said Stevenson. Beyond mere acquisition should be the zest for discovery, the zest for creative scholarship. The student of today who has attained high scholastic honors should at least have an ambition, first, to give his culture spreading power and second to make his learning beget more knowledge. To know the best that has been thought and said in the world is a noble passion, but to add still more to the accumulated stock of knowledge, however little, is a finer and a rarer passion. To reverence and conserve noble traditions is commendable, but to think and live progressively is the surest way to perpetuate the spirit of them. A grandfather's clock is a noble piece of furniture, ornamental, stately, and socially very respectable. By all means let us keep it in the hall or on the stairway. It gives us poise, it steadies us, it keeps up the ancestral connection. But let us not substitute it for our watch as our standard time-piece. In our intellectual and spiritual lives, let us not look too insistently at the standards of yesterday, but with open minds, as seekers after truth, welcome the light of today and the promise of the morrow.

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